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Noticias y Notas

News and notes from the Second Judicial District Court

Always ready to lend a hand

John Schoeppner likes helping people, especially those who struggle to help themselves. That is why his decision to leave the Second Judicial District Court—which may seem surprising at first—makes perfect sense when you hear what he plans to do next. John is stepping down from his position as a Special Master in the Second Judicial District Children’s Court to become a staff attorney at Enlace Comunitario, a non-profit organization that provides social and legal services to Latino immigrants who are victims of domestic violence.



Special Master John Schoeppner

In a recent conversation in a conference room at the Juvenile Justice Center, John said he has been thinking about making this change for a while.

“I have been here 17 years, and I literally have heard thousands of juvenile delinquency, child welfare and civil commitment cases,” he said. “That wears on you over time. I want to leave while I still think I am doing a good job. This is a good time to leave, especially as I look around and see a world in great need of advocates for people who are marginalized. I am ready to transition from being an impartial decision-maker to an advocate.”

This change is taking John back to his original reason for choosing to practice law. “My roots are in legal aid,” he said. “I originally went to law school to do legal services type of work, helping people who normally would have trouble getting legal representation.”

John is a Santa Fe native, and though his last name, Schoeppner, might indicate otherwise, he has deep Northern New Mexico Hispanic roots. His father John Schoeppner, Sr., moved to New Mexico from Iowa in the late 1940s, when he met and married Benita Salas, whose family lived in and around Raton. “Other than my father, my whole family is Hispanic, including all thirty of my first cousins,” John said.

Early advocacy

John said his desire to advocate on behalf of the less fortunate was sparked shortly after he graduated high school and was working at a gas station near the state capitol. During the legislative sessions, a lot of the station’s customers were state legislators. “Those were days of full-service gas stations,” John recalled. “We would pump gas and check oil for everyone who drove in. We also made minimum wage, which at the time was about \$3.25 an hour. I also remember it was cold in Santa Fe in January and February.”

Already an unofficial advocate for the marginalized, John said, he made it a point to talk to people driving cars with legislative license plates. “I would tell them, ‘hey, we’re freezing out here for \$3.25 an hour. You guys need to get us a higher minimum wage.’ Some of them were really mean when I said that. I remembered that, and it made me want to go to law school so I could help those people making minimum wage.”

See John cont., on next page



Shout outs



This is the space where we sound the horn for outstanding performances.

This week’s shout out goes to **Captain Mary Shaw** of the Metropolitan Detention Center. She has been instrumental in keeping open the lines of communication between MDC and District Court throughout the pandemic. This has been especially important when it comes to making sure that in-custody defendants are present and connected for remote hearings. For that, we **Salute** Captain Shaw and her MDC staff.

We need more news and notes. Share your stories by contacting us at: albdxh@nmcourt.gov

John, cont.

In 1980, John enrolled in the University of New Mexico as an undergraduate, completing a degree in Economics and Latin American studies, before attending UNM School of Law, from which he graduated in 1989.

For the next 14 years John was, as puts it, “a courtroom lawyer,” representing indigent clients, first with New Mexico Legal Aid and then as a contract attorney with the Law Office of the Public Defender. In 2003, John joined the Second Judicial District Court as a Truancy Hearing Officer.

Judge John Romero said the way John handled his assignment as a truancy hearing officer was an early indicator of the impact he would have on the court. “The truancy statute as that time was designed to sanction parents for their kids not going to school, in effect criminalizing the parents’ behavior,” Judge Romero said. “But John’s late wife was a school teacher, and he knew that a lot of parents were dropping their kids off at the front door of the school only to have the kids go out the back door while the parents went off to work.”



John Schoeppner and Children's Court Presiding Judge Marie Ward

Helping wherever he can

John used that knowledge to convince the court's then-presiding judge to allow him meet with parents, teachers and students after hours, sometimes at the school rather than the courthouse, to talk about why students were missing school and find ways to solve the problem. That ultimately became the new model for Truancy Court.

“That showed that John was creative, innovative and a problem solver,” Judge Romero said.

Those traits soon prompted people to seek John out to serve on committees tasked with improving the ways in which Juvenile Courts served young people and their families, both locally and across the country.

“He never hesitated to volunteer to take on additional duties to fulfill the mission of the court, including participating or chairing numerous justice committees,” said Judge Marie Ward, the current Presiding Judge of Children's Court. “In 2007 he was asked to serve as the Mental Health Commissioner for the SJDC, which has led to him being one of the most sought out members of the judiciary to assist in improving delivery and access to justice for this very vulnerable population.”

As his days at the court start to wind down, John chokes up when talking about what the past 17 years have meant to him. “[Chief Judge Stan] Whitaker often talks about this court as being a family,” John said. “I could not agree more. I have nothing but love and respect for the people I have worked with here. I will always be grateful for having been granted the privilege of working at the Second Judicial District Court.”

Identify the graduate

The correct answer for last week's photo was Family Court Presiding Judge Debra Ramirez. Jennifer Genung from Special Services, you earn the prize for answering first. [Janet Van Why](#) in HR has your prize. That concludes our Guess the Graduate contest. We hope you all had fun.

